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SUBJECT: WEST ACEH'S TIGHT PANTS LAW LOOSEMED UP

REFERENCES: Jakarta 1569 and previous

1. (U) This cable is Sensitive but Unclassified. Please handle accordingly. This message was coordinated with Embassy Jakarta.

2. (SBU) SUMMARY: A local Shariah edict in West Aceh District banning women from wearing pants which will go into effect in February has been softened due to community pressure to relax the controversial rule. In response to public outcry, West Aceh Regent Ramli Mansur decided that loose pants are morally acceptable. While the vast majority of West Acehnese found the current trend of skintight pants offensive, many men and women objected to the government dictating how women can dress. END SUMMARY.

3. (SBU) West Aceh District Regent Ramli Mansur made international news in October when he announced that women in his backwater coastal part of Aceh would be banned from wearing pants beginning in January 2010. He told the media that Muslim women caught with their pants on would be subject to detention by Shariah police. Police would cut off the pants with scissors and issue long skirts. The law does not apply to non-Muslims, although skimpy clothing remains unacceptable for anyone, including men. As early as October, religious police began setting up posts at all major roads into the district capital of Meulaboh, warning women who wore pants. Non-Muslim women wearing pants complained that they were being turned away from government services, including hospitals.

4. (SBU) In Aceh, where women have traditionally worn the pants in the family, this edict did not sit well. Since ancient times, Acehnese women have had a proud history of fighting next to their men and sitting on the throne of power. In some recent cases when religious police pulled over motorcycles to warn women against wearing pants, husbands or boyfriends pulled out machetes, daring police to lay a finger on their partners.

5. (SBU) Mansur's motivation was a combination of his traditional rural upbringing, pressure from a small minority of conservative clerics, and political opportunism under the premise that moral values win votes. However, soon after he issued the edict (qanun), he began soft peddling it in the face of negative local, national and international attention. In a November meeting with ConGen Medan, he said loose pants might be acceptable and that pants would not be cut off. He added that he did not feel that strongly about pants himself but was getting heat from religious leaders. ConGen told Mansur that the edict has given Aceh and Indonesia a very unwelcoming name, and that the law will drive away not only international tourists and investors but even those from other parts of Indonesia, where most women wear pants.

6. (SBU) Discussions with men and women from all walks of life in Meulaboh revealed that the pants law was on everyone's mind and that

feelings were ambivalent. Even young female university students and women's rights activists told us that the style now sweeping Indonesia of skintight, low-slung jeans was in bad taste. However, many also said moral suasion would be more effective than proscription. Young women said the law would make it difficult to ride motorcycles, while young people joked about how girls would need to hike up their skirts to mount motorcycles. Along with tight pants, many had become concerned about widespread smooching on public beaches before the current Regent began cracking down.

¶7. (SBU) In a talk with a hundred students at West Sumatra's only university, questions focused on the U.S. reaction to the edict. They nodded solemnly when ConGen told them about the negative impact and how in the U.S. community values determine modes of fashion rather than laws. Three sub-district heads who work directly under Mansur were very concerned when we told them how the edict could hurt the West Aceh economy. One whispered to our Indonesian political assistant that he thought the edict was "stupid." They pleaded with ConGen to tell Mansur that the edict was a bad idea.

¶8. (SBU) Public reservations were airedQ a December seminar to solicit community input. As a result of this meeting, the law was eased to allow women to wear loose pants provided they also wear a long shirt which hides their feminine form. When the final proposed law was announced in late December, negative public reaction was minimal, media and activists told us. The local Parliament still has to review and pass the law, which is expected to begin implementation in February. The latest report from West Aceh is that loose pants and skirts now prevail.

HUME